QUEEN BERTHA.

A Tale of Mediaeval “Gestours.”

IT was soon after the middle of the eighth century that King Pepin, according to ancient story, at length enjoyed the crown of France in that peace and tranquillity of which, during the earlier part of his reign, the turbulence of his barons had effectually deprived him. His first queen had died childless, and he was anxious to provide an heir to his kingdom. Under these circumstances, he called together his council in haste, in order to consult them on the choice of a queen. Their voices were unanimous in favour of the beautiful and virtuous Bertha, only daughter of the king of Hungary.

The king and queen of Hungary at this time were Floire and Blancheflor, personages no less celebrated in medieval romance than Pepin himself, and both they and their court, according to the story, were as well acquainted with the manners and language of France as if it had been their native land. When the Frankish messengers, sent to demand the hand of this princess, after traversing the numerous petty states into which Germany was then divided, reached at length the Hungarian Court, their embassy was received in the most favourable manner; and Bertha was entrusted to their care to be escorted to the kingdom of her future husband. She was accompanied only by a female serf belonging to her father’s court named Margiste, Margiste’s daughter Aliste, and their kinsman Tybert. Margiste had been taken into the special favour of the king and queen of Hungary, and had been charged by them with the care of their daughter; and Aliste, who bore a striking personal resemblance to the princess Bertha, had been educated rather as her companion than as her servant.

Great was the rejoicing when the princess Bertha entered Paris, and grand the display for her reception; the wedding festival was magnificent, and King Pepin’s palace resounded with the strains of the most skilful minstrels

that could be gathered together from all parts. Everything seemed to denote lasting prosperity and happiness.

But, if we accept the teaching of medieval romance, a mind of slavish origin, however high the individual might be raised in honour and dignities, always betrayed in the sequel its original baseness, and so it was in the present case. Amid the rejoicings and festivities which welcomed the arrival of Bertha in Paris, her confidential attendants, aware that they formed almost her sole credentials, were plotting treason and murder in order to substitute Aliste for the princess in Pepin's household. It has just been stated that Bertha and Aliste bore a close resemblance to each other. By a stratagem which was in accordance with the manners of former days, but which will hardly bear relating at present, the princess was induced to permit Aliste to take her place in the royal bed on the night of her nuptials, while she herself slept with Margiste in an adjoining chamber. Before daybreak, Bertha entered the chamber of Pepin silently to resume her place, as had been agreed, when the slave who had been personating her rose suddenly from the bed, and, having stabbed herself unperceived sufficiently to draw blood, and placed the knife in the hand of her unsuspecting mistress, awoke the king with her screams, and told him that Aliste, the companion of her youth, had penetrated into the nuptial apartment and sought to murder her. At the same time Margiste rushed into the room, burst into imprecations against her pretended daughter for the meditated crime, and, with the assistance of Tybert, who was at hand, and accessory to the plot, dragged Bertha, speechless with astonishment and confusion, from the royal presence, and bound and gagged her, so as to deprive her of the power of speaking.

The treacherous Aliste was now master of the king, who had not known them long enough to distinguish the slave from the princess, for the nuptials had been celebrated on the day of their arrival. At her instigation, Pepin gave orders that the pretended murderess should be immediately put to death; and, under the pretext of avoiding scandal, it was further resolved that the whole transaction should be kept in profound secrecy, and that the

unfortunate princess should be delivered to three of the king's servants in whom he could place the greatest trust. These, under the direction of Tybert, were to carry her privately to the vast wilds of the forest of Maine, and there put her to death and leave her body exposed to birds and beasts of prey. Placed on a swift palfrey, Bertha, bound hand and mouth, and her person concealed under a capacious mantle, was carried farther and farther into the forest during five days. On the sixth day they reached one of its wildest solitudes, and there they halted, and, taking the princess from her seat, drew away the mantle, and the cruel Tybert prepared to strike off her head with his sword. But her beauty and dignity excited to such a degree the compassion of the three attendants, that they not only pleaded for her life, but, while one of them kept Tybert at bay, the two others unbound the lady, and she disappeared from their sight amid the thickets of the forest. As it would have been a vain labour to seek to recover their victim, Tybert and his three companions invented a story, by which they convinced Margiste and her daughter, the false queen, that they had duly performed their errand.

The cries of the night-birds, and the distant howl of the wolves, struck terror into the mind of Bertha, as she fled through the leafy wilderness, not knowing whither. The weather, too, seemed to conspire against her, and the storm broke over her, rain and hail, and thunder and lightning. On Bertha fled, and if she thought of anything, it was of the happy court of Hungary, and of her kind mother Blancheflor, until, cold and wet and weary, her feet bleeding, and her clothes and skin torn with thorns and brambles, she fainted and dropped on the ground. When she recovered, she fell on her knees and prayed to heaven for protection, and heaven heard and protected her. She then continued her flight, still ignorant as before of the route she was taking, until nightfall came, and then, shivering with cold and hunger, she made herself a bed of leaves under a bush, her only protection against the inclemency of the weather, and lay down to rest. Here a new danger threatened the unfortunate princess. Two robbers of the forest came suddenly and found her, and seized her for their prey; but a dispute

for priority of possession led to a sanguinary fight, in which both were mortally wounded, and Bertha again took to flight, till at length she was arrested by a stream, which she could not pass, and she laid her down under a thick thorn-bush on its banks, and wept till she fell asleep. She awoke at midnight. The weather had then cleared, and the moon shone so bright, that she thought it was day, and, after praying devoutly, she continued her flight. She found a well, drank at it, and felt refreshed. Soon afterwards, she met with faint traces of a path, which brought her to a lonely hermitage, and she knocked at the door, and asked for shelter. But the holy hermit, astonished to see a beautiful woman in the forest at that hour, concluded that it was the evil one, who had come in disguise to tempt him to unchastity, so he made the sign of the cross, and refused her admittance. Her entreaties, however, so far prevailed upon him, that he gave her a portion of his coarse black bread, and showed her a path which led to the house of the good farmer Symon and his wife Constance.

Symon, whose house was in the forest, happened to be out early that morning, and was not a little astonished to meet in his way a beautiful damsel, whose delicate features and rich garment bespoke rank and wealth, while the state in which she appeared told of the great sufferings she had undergone. Ho stopped, and asked her who she was, and whence she came. She chose to conceal the truth, and told him a plausible story, how she was the daughter of a gentleman of Alsace, which was then suffering under the ravages of war to such a degree that they had been obliged to seek safety in exile, and that she was herself flying from the cruelty of a stepmother; and she added that she had been recommended by the hermit to the favour of Symon the farmer. Symon immediately took her to his house, and presented her to his wife.

This excellent household consisted of Symon himself, his wife Constance, and two young and fair daughters, named Isabel and Aiglente, all honest and worthy people, under whose hospitable care Bertha soon recovered her usual cheerfulness. Constance took her into her own chamber, placed her

before a blazing fire, rubbed her benumbed limbs, and served her with food. The princess confessed her name was Bertha, and rather shrank from the remark which followed, that it was the same as that of their new queen, the daughter of the king of Hungary. Constance and her two daughters became greatly attached to her, and attended upon her with affectionate care.

A new circumstance soon increased this friendship. Symon's two daughters passed their time in working on embroidery, an accomplishment which was then valued highly; and one day, soon after her arrival, Bertha saw them at Work, and offered to teach them something which they had not learnt. In those days it was a special portion of the education of a princess to excel in embroidery, and other work of a similar description, and the two damsels were astonished at excellence such as they had never seen before. From that time Bertha was a greater favourite than ever, for she had become a valuable as well as an agreeable companion, and her work and her example were worth more than her board. Thus she remained with her friendly hosts nine years and a half, advancing ever in their esteem and love.

Daring this time, how went things in the fair city of Paris? The slave Aliste was believed by everybody to be the queen Bertha, and no inquiry was made as to what had become of Aliste herself. She had two sons by the king, Rainfrois and Heudri, whose conduct in life betrayed the baseness of the blood from which, on one side, they were derived. The false queen, who never went to church, and occupied herself chiefly with the care of amassing treasure, soon made herself hateful by her tyranny and extortion.

Meanwhile changes had taken place at the court of Hungary. A sister and brother of Bertha died a few months after she left her home, and she and her descendants remained the only heirs of King Floire. The latter had no suspicion of the treason of Margiste and Aliste, and supposed that the personage known as Pepin's queen was his daughter Bertha. He held counsel one night with his queen Blancheflor, and it was resolved to send a messenger to Palis to ask that Heudri, the youngest of Pepin's sons by

Bertha, should be sent to Hungary, to be brought up there as the heir to the Hungarian throne. Under the influence of Aliste and Margiste this demand was refused. The trouble of mind which this refusal caused to Floire and Blancheflor was increased by an ominous dream of the latter, and Floire consented that his queen should proceed to France to see her daughter, and that she should endeavour to bring back with her one of her grandsons, either Heudri or Rainfrois. Blancheflor proceeded on her journey with great pomp; the king accompanied her part of the way, and she carried with her to Paris an escort of a hundred of the best knights in Hungary. When she entered France she found no welcome from the populace, and she heard nothing but words of hatred against the queen her daughter. All this was strange news to the queen of Hungary, who knew that her child had been nourished in high and noble sentiments, and could not believe that she had degenerated from the blood which ran in her veins. Yet everywhere, as she continued her route, she met nothing but complaints of queen Bertha's tyranny and injustice. These complaints increased as she approached king Pepin's capital, and she wondered more and more how a princess so good and so fair as Bertha had been could have been changed into an object of universal hatred.

But the approach of Blancheflor raised another sort of agitation in the royal palace. In those days news travelled slowly, and the queen of Hungary was already near Paris when Pepin received intelligence of her visit, and he immediately announced it to his queen. Aliste — the false Bertha — knew well that Blancheflor could not, like Pepin, be deceived in her identity, and in secret terror she hurried to her mother, and they held counsel with Tybert.

Various plans were suggested, one of which was to murder Blancheflor by means of poisoned fruit, but it was finally resolved that Aliste, under pretence of sudden and dangerous illness, should take to her bed, that her room should be darkened, and that it should be insisted that her life would be endangered by the agitation of an interview with her supposed mother.

Thus it was hoped that Blancheflor might depart without seeing her, and the danger would be averted.

Meanwhile Blancheflor arrived at Montmartre, where Pepin with his two sons met her, and she was conducted into Paris in state. When she inquired for her daughter, she was informed of her dangerous illness, of which none had heard before, and when the king presented his two sons to her, she experienced an aversion to them which she could not explain, and felt unwilling even to embrace them. Sadness took possession of her heart. Her first desire was to visit her daughter, but Margiste appeared, and did all she could to prevent her. Margiste had formerly enjoyed her confidence, and she suspected no deceit in her. When she inquired for Aliste, Margiste informed her that her daughter had died suddenly, soon after the royal marriage. Blancheflor now insisted on haying an interview with her daughter, and she was conducted into the chamber of Pepin's queen, in profound darkness, and, at her bed side, had a short conversation that was so little satisfactory that her suspicions were excited. At last, in great agitation, she called in her own attendants, tore away curtains and shutters, and let in the light, and saw that Pepin's queen was not her daughter Bertha, but Aliste, the daughter of the slave Margiste. It is unnecessary to describe the astonishment of Pepin and his court when this unexpected discovery was announced. Margiste and Tybert were immediately seized and thrown into prison. The former, under the pressure of torture, first confessed, and Tybert told all, with the further revelation that Bertha had not, as Margiste believed, been put to death, but that she had escaped into the forest. Margiste was burnt and Tybert hanged. Aliste, who had been to some extent a tool in the hands of her wicked mother, and had borne children to Pepin, was spared to repent, and became a nun of Montmartre. Blancheflor, believing that her daughter was dead, returned disconsolate to Hungary.

But all this time, where is the true queen Bertha herself? We left her at work on her embroidery in the humble household of the farmer Symon,

where she seems to have become contented with her lot, resolved on passing the rest of her life in this humble retirement. Symon heard of the strange occurrences just described, and of the supposed fate of the beautiful queen, and, comparing one thing with another, he had his suspicions, and communicated them to his wife Constance; but when they questioned Bertha, she denied that she was the queen. The three men who had set her at liberty from Tybert came before the king, told him all they knew, and he sent them to the forest of Maine to seek information on the fate of their victim. Fifteen days they wandered about the forest, making fruitless inquiries, and then all hope of obtaining further information was abandoned.

One day King Pepin was with his court at Mans; it was Whitsuntide when kings and their courts always sought recreation, and Pepin and his barons went into the forest to hunt. In the heat of the chase, Pepin became separated from his companions, and lost himself in the intricacies of the wood. At length, he came to a little chapel, where he found a beautiful maiden occupied in prayer. He addressed her courteously, told her he was one of the king's attendants who had lost his way, and begged her to show him to the nearest house. She replied with the courtesy of a lady, and was conducting him to the house of Symon the farmer, when the king, struck by her beauty and manners, took her in his arms, and prayed her to grant him her love. She resisted, but in vain, and it is hard to say to what length he might have gone, had die not exclaimed, to protect herself against his violence, "I am Queen Bertha, the daughter of Floire and Blancheflor!" It was, indeed, Bertha herself, and the chapel was a little cell where Symon's family, whose house was distant only four or five bow-shots, were accustomed to attend mass, and that day she had been accidentally left there alone. Who was ever astonished like King Pepin, when he thus (unexpectedly found his long lost wife? He i called Symon before him, questioned him on all the circumstances of his first meeting with the lady, and his answers, compared with the information previously given by the three companions of Tybert, left room for no further doubt of the truth. It is

enough to add that the lost queen was carried to Paris in pomp and triumph, that the Courts of France and Hungary were filled with joy, and that Queen Bertha lived long and happily with her royal husband, and became the mother of Charles Martel, who in his heroic career sent so many souls of unbelieving Saracens to, I will not imitate the old “gestour” in naming the place.

The history of romantic literature is allied far more intimately than is commonly imagined with the history of nations. The progress of this literature in each nation separately is distinguished by peculiarities of a national character, but bears a constant relationship to the same progress in other nations, and this relationship exhibits itself ever more strongly as we trace it backwards to the remote ages of antiquity.

In the earlier history of every people, before its conversion to Christianity, or its subjection to some other influence which overthrew its primitive belief, its romance was literally its mythology. This had been formed at a very remote period, and consisted of a combination of the religious belief of the people with the fabulous history of its “heroic ” ages. When we institute a comparison between the Eddas of the North, the Niebelungen Lied and the stories of the Heldenbuch of the Germans, and the remains of Anglo-Saxon romance, as exhibited in Beowulf, &c., we see that the primaeval romance of the various branches of the Teutonic stock was essentially the same. If we knew the popular details of the cycles of romances which are represented pictorially on those numerous and beautiful Etruscan vases, which belong to a poetical age antecedent to that with the literature of which we are now , acquainted, we should probably find them closely analogous to the mythology of the North The Iliad was to Greece exactly what the Niebelungen Lied is to Germany, and Beowulf to the Anglo-Saxons: an episode of its mythic history, worked up and polished according to the ideas of an age which was already much advanced from that of what we consider primaeval barbarism.

There is, however, a period in the history of the civilisation of all nations, at which the original national mythology loosens its grasp upon people's minds, and then it makes a sudden step towards our modem notions of the character of romance. This change is generally the result of great national revolutions, of an intermixture with races of a higher degree of intellectual culture, or of conversion to a new religion. Among the Anglo-Saxons, who preserved their national individuality [through a long period after their settlement I in this island, their primitive romances seem to have remained very little modified to the latest period of their monarchy, and they only! experienced the change alluded to after the I Norman Conquest; while among the Franks, who were thrown into more immediate and sudden contact with Roman civilisation, the original mythic romances seem to have been entirely lost long before we know anything of the literature of the people which was formed from the intermixture and fusion of the ancient and mediaeval races which took place so extensively in Gaul and Italy.

The first consequence of these changes was the involuntary confusion of the older mythic legends with places with which they had no relation, and with more recent history from which they were altogether distinct. In this manner arose a new mythic age — the heroic period of the Christian middle ages; and thus were formed the national romance cycles of the different nations of modem Europe. The heroic age of France embraced the earlier reigns of the Carlovingian dynasty — those of! Charles Martel, and Pepin, and Charlemagne — and the domestic feuds of turbulent chieftains, the bold crimes of a reckless and barbarous age, or the greater wars against the Saracenic invaders, took the place of the primaeval myths of the Frankish race, and became in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the subject of a very extensive class of French metrical romances, which, from the belief that they were really historical, and that they related the geste or deeds of real personages, were distinguished by the general title of Chansons de gate. The number of these romances which still exist is very great, although but few have yet been printed. Many of them consist of long, wearisome details of imaginary wars and battles, which only interest us as pictures of

mediaeval manners; others paint to us more briefly scenes of domestic crime and treason, or the loves and gallantries of an age in which people took little pains to conceal or restrain the passions by which they were agitated. One of the least complicated in its plot of this latter class is their story of Queen Bertha, as given above, which has been printed in France under the title of the Romans de Berte aux grans pies. Although the primitive representative of Bertha belongs to the mythology of the northern peoples, and no such adventures ever happened to a queen of Pepin, yet her story, as given in the romance, was no doubt more or less that of many an injured lady in the middle ages.

Thomas Wright.

[Once a Week, Jan. 6. 1868.